

Unite's Arriva London South pay deal accepted, but large "no" vote shows anger

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Bus drivers at Arriva London South (ALS) have voted to accept a revised pay deal between Unite and the company that delivers a below-inflation 3.5 percent pay rise and a £250 lump sum for last year. It was the third offer from Arriva after two earlier offers of 1.5 and 3 percent were overwhelmingly rejected.

The dispute over last year's deal, involving 1,000 ALS drivers, has revealed mounting anger over years of wage suppression and current spiralling inflation that hit 11.1 percent RPI in April. Drivers at Arriva are among the lowest paid in London.

Across the four ALS garages—Brixton, Norwood, Thornton Heath and Croydon—the revised pay deal passed by 484 votes to 374 in a ballot on Friday. At Thornton Heath, most drivers voted “no”—138 to 73. At Norwood the “no” vote was also substantial at 114, versus 150 “yes” votes.

The deal passed by a majority of 56 percent. The sizeable “no” vote defied Unite's concerted campaign to promote the deal as the best drivers could get. Unite national officer for buses Bobbie Morton claimed it was an “improved offer” and used it to cancel a 48-hour strike due to take place last Monday.

Morton was put in charge of pay talks by Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham, who is determined to prevent a wage break-out across the buses. Just one day before ALS drivers were balloted, Unite and the GMB suspended a planned 7-day strike by bus workers across Northern Ireland, based on a 5 percent pay offer for last year.

The deal at ALS is even worse than the 3 percent offer rejected by drivers on March 25. That deal included a £300 lump-sum, versus £250 in the current award. Unite claimed it was “improved” solely due to an extra 0.5 percent that will be subtracted from this year's yet to be negotiated pay award.

Overall, the deal is substantially below inflation that ran at 7 percent in the 12 months to March 2022 (the period

covered by last year's pay talks). On top of that, the award will be backdated only to August.

Unite's response to the passage of its deal with Arriva has been muted—no press release has been issued so far. But on social media Unite's defenders have been shameless—“WELL DONE. We are going to use ARRIVA drivers and their union officials as an example.”

The only “example” Unite has offered during the dispute is one of collusion and betrayal. Unite worked to isolate ALS drivers and wear them down. The dispute only happened because drivers rejected below-inflation pay deals taken to them by Unite officials.

At Brixton and Croydon, Unite's role extended to outright sabotage. Unite's rep at Croydon had counselled drivers to work during the first round of strikes, while at Brixton the union helped create the false impression that a court injunction had been obtained by the company to ban strike action.

“Remember you have to loose [sic] to gain in the long run,” was a Unite rep's ludicrous argument on social media. Exactly how a below-inflation pay deal with Arriva lays the foundation for a future “gain” remained unexplained.

Workers at all four garages showed their determination to fight, but the pay dispute brought them face to face with Unite's corporatist partnership with the bus operators. While Graham and her senior officials routinely denounce “greedy bosses”, her reps at ALS blurted out the union's real agenda, claiming that Arriva is struggling financially and cannot afford to give more!

An audio message from a Unite rep was shared by drivers over the weekend, explaining, “you've got to remember that they [the bus companies] work on very narrow profit margins... so any rise we get comes out of their profit margin. And they're only working on a five percent profit margin.

“So if we ask for 20 percent, they've got to find it from

somewhere. They'll go backwards and forwards, they'll bring their accountants in... and at the end of the day this is what happened in Arriva North; the governor said, 'Look, I can't tender for routes and win tenders at those wage rates, because I'm competing against companies with lower wages'."

The same arguments will soon be used against an inflation-busting pay award for 2022. Unite is a union in name only, defending corporate profits over workers' wages, conditions and lives.

A driver from Brixton who voted to accept the pay deal told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "If we had shut down for two days last week, Arriva would've cried. It was a way to keep us quiet. We've accepted it so far as it is, I've accepted it, but I'm not thrilled about it.

"£250 backpay is peanuts. Compared to a bag of peanuts, it's just one piece of peanut. Living conditions are very hard, so we are only asking for what is fair.

"Outside of London, drivers have been offered 5.6 percent, so why are we getting less in London? We only get six months' worth of backpay, that's where the cut is. I'm not happy with that."

Unite forced through its shabby pay deal by exploiting drivers' desire to push ahead with this year's pay claim. Drivers had no confidence they would get anything better from Unite for last year and are demanding action now to address rampant inflation.

A letter from Unite lead officer for buses John Murphy demanding a 15 percent pay rise for 2022 at Arriva London North was circulated widely ahead of last week's ballot. It was hailed by Unite activists as proof that Graham's team is leading a fightback, with James Rossi declaring that Graham is "a ray of light in the pitch-black darkness".

Unite has no intention of fighting for 15 percent, or anything approaching it.

As another Brixton driver told the WSWS, "It's a joke. Sharon Graham has been blowing her horn on social media about massive results for workers against companies—how come this is nowhere near that?

"The acting rep was saying this was the best we could possibly get and basically telling people to vote yes and take it. He is one of the most vocal on the Arriva South WhatsApp [group], with Kev Mustafa, and they are leading the debate in the wrong direction.

"The official excuse we get from the reps is that this year they're going to go for 15 percent. It's hard to believe they will go against what they usually do, caving at the last moment. People are not happy, and you have

very senior drivers who were against the deal.

"The convener said they are going to go for 15 percent [this year], and then you get other reps saying we'll go for 8 percent and then it goes down and down and down. They're having union elections like they mean something, but there's no consultation process so what are they talking about? They've got no authority.

"I think the drivers just wanted to get rid of last year's [pay talks] and hopefully that means they're ready to fight for this year's deal. People are realising that things are not going in the right direction. Things are moving very fast.

"15 percent is a good place to start for this year's pay claim, but we probably need 20 percent.

"It's ridiculous. If you look at pay, Arriva is at the bottom of the pile. They are paid the same amount as the other companies in London [by Transport for London] and yet we are paid less, so that means for every driver Arriva makes more profit than the other companies, not less. They've got plenty!"

In the aftermath of Friday's vote, drivers across London face the reality that any struggle to combat the cost-of-living crisis can only proceed through an organised rebellion against Unite. The union is policing the demands of the bus operators and working to suppress any challenge from the workforce.

Throughout the Arriva South pay dispute, the WSWS and the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee exposed Unite's conspiracy against bus workers and put forward a programme of struggle to unite bus, rail and London Underground workers against the transport companies, Mayor Khan's TfL and the Johnson government.

This fight must be taken forward at every garage through the formation of rank-and-file committees. Such committees, uniting all bus workers, both union and non-union, must draw up demands for improved pay, conditions and safety, and forge links with key sections of the working class coming into struggle across the UK, Europe and internationally.



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